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JOHN RASTELL'S DRAMATIC ACTIVITIES

Discoveries by Mr. Plomer of depositions in certain lawsuits involving John Rastell have established some interesting facts in Rastell's life:¹ that during the years 1520-35, when his printing-house was "at the sygne of the mearemayd next to pollys gate," Rastell, leaving his printing business to his aids, resided much of the year at his home in Finsbury Fields; that some time previous to 1526 he had erected in his "ground beside Finsbury" a stage for players, which, if we may judge from the mention of "board, timber, lath, nail, sprig and daubing" was no makeshift; that ten elaborate players' garments of colored silks and rich cloths, besides curtains and other stuffs, were prepared for Rastell, Mistress Rastell assisting tailors at the work; and that these costumes, according to the testimony of one witness in the lawsuit, had been "occupied three or four years in playing and disguising" before Rastell, leaving for France, lent them to one Walton.

In this theatrical venture of Rastell's there seems to have been a definite purpose, which probably produced definite literary results in the plays he wrote and printed. Rastell's letter to Cromwell near the end of his life expresses his spirit and purpose: "I regard ryches as much as I do chypps, save only to have a lyffying to lyff out of det; . . . But I desyre most so to spend my tyme to do somewhat for the commyn welth, as God be my Juge."² The same ideal is set forth by the Messenger who speaks the Prologue in *The Nature of the Four Elements*, written by Rastell not long before 1520, that is, around the time when he must have inaugurated his theatrical venture.³ A desire to educate the people and to promote a worthy literature in the English tongue is also strongly expressed in this

¹ H. R. Plomer in *Bibliographica*, II, 437-51, and *Trans. of Bibliographical Soc.*, IV, 155-57. The papers concerning Rastell's stage are printed in full by A. W. Pollard in *Fifteenth Century Prose and Verse*, pp. 307-21, a volume of the new "English Garner."

² Ellis, *Original Letters*, 3d Series, II, 311.

³ Professor Wallace's argument in *Evolution of the Drama*, p. 16, note, that Bale's use of the word *edidit* in mentioning the play under Rastell's name does not indicate authorship is without value, for, as Professor Manly points out to me, Bale employs the word in various works to indicate authorship.

Prologue. In the same spirit Rastell simplified history, choosing chiefly facts of English history, and published his work in 1529 under the title *The Pastime of People*. His publication of plays seems to have been inspired by the same purpose, and I think it probable that he either wrote or helped to write for his own stage the majority of the plays published by him. Disregarding detailed internal evidence for Rastell's authorship of several of these plays, I wish simply to suggest here briefly the possibility that a number of the plays from Rastell's press owe at least their inception to his plan for a stage that should profit his community.

The interlude *Of Gentylnes and Nobylte* ends with the statement: "Johēs rastell me fieri fecit." Mr. Pollard takes this to refer, not to printing, but at least to production and probably to joint authorship,¹ and I believe that he is correct. In tone and in the instruction for the common people this play accords exactly with Rastell's plans. *Calisto and Melebea* concludes, "Johēs rastell me imprimi fecit," and Professor Gayley remarks that Rastell perhaps wrote the play as well as caused it to be printed.² Certainly its suitability to Rastell's program seems to me hardly fortuitous. *Calisto and Melebea* belongs to a series of translated or adapted plays printed by Rastell, all of which might have been utilized for his stage.³ There is at least strong reason for believing that Rastell and some associate⁴ translated the *Andria* of Terence, published, presumably by Rastell, about 1520. The following passages from the Prologue of *The Four Elements* and the Epilogue of *Andria* are so similar⁵ and express Rastell's aims so well that I judge the *Andria* passage to be from his pen:

¹ Gayley, *Representative English Comedies*, I, 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. lxviii.

³ Rastell's natural assistants in the work of adapting these plays would be the members of More's household or group. Cf. Watson, *Vives and the Renaissance Education of Women*, for the activity of the More household at this period in translating into English works dealing with the instruction of women. *Calisto and Melebea* may be a product of the same zeal.

⁴ The translators are constantly spoken of in the plural in the Prologue and the Epilogue. These two parts are printed in Flügel's *Neuenglisches Lesebuch*, pp. 96-99, and an extract from the play itself in Collier's *Hist. Dram. Poetry* (1831), II, 365, n.

⁵ The Prologue of *Andria* enforces the similarity between the two statements.

Four Elements

But though the matter be not so well
 declaryd
 As a great clerke coude do nor so sub-
 stancyall
 Yet the auctour
 The grekes the romayns with many
 other mo
 In their moder tonge wrot warkes ex-
 cellent
 Than yf clerkes in this realme wolde
 take payn so
 Consydering that our tonge is now
 suffycient
 To expoun any hard sentence euydent
 They myght yf they wolde in our eng-
 lyshe tonge
 wryte workys of grauyte somtyme
 amonge

 Than yf connyng late bokys were
 translate
 In to Englyshe wel correct and appro-
 bate
 All subtell sciens in englyshe myght be
 lernyd.

Andria

And for this thig is broughte ito theglish
 tong
 We pray you all not to be discontent
 For the laten boke which hath be vsyd
 so long
 Was translate owt of greke this is euy-
 dent
 And sith our english tong is now suffi-
 cient
 The matter to expresse we think it best
 alway
 Before english men in english it to play.
 Yet they think the self that this thing
 haue done
 Not able to do this sufficiently
 But for it shuld be a prouocacion
 To them that can do it more substan-
 cyally
 To translate this agayn or some other
 comedy
 For the erudicōn of them that will lern.

The English translation of Lucian's *Necromantia* which Rastell printed along with the Latin may also be from his pen. According to the title, the work is a "dialog of the poet Lucyen, for his fantesye faynyd for a mery pastyme"—perhaps an indication that it was intended for dramatic performance—and was "translated out of Laten into Englissh for the erudicion of them, which be disposyd to lerne the tongis." The choice of Lucian may have been due to More's earlier translation of Lucian into Latin. Finally, the fragment of *The Prodigal Son*, translated from a Latin dialogue of Textor, is ascribed to Rastell's press and to the decade with which we are dealing. It is sufficient to say that all these translations admirably fit Rastell's purpose in his stage venture and that such work is quite in keeping with his compilation from various sources for *The Pastime*

of *People* and *The Four Elements*.¹ Rastell and his collaborators, whoever they were, aimed, not at originality, but at instruction.

Though a strong didactic purpose in the drama would seem to associate Rastell with the old spirit of the moralities, and though *The Four Elements* is in method clearly under the influence of the moralities, Rastell's affiliations are with the new spirit of humanism, which furnished much of the material even for *The Four Elements*. It is true that Rastell probably lacked an intense passion for profound learning and for church reform; but all the plays which may be associated with his name deal with themes or are drawn from sources indicating a humanistic outlook, and the hint of the reformer's spirit in his plays is all the more significant when we remember that, in spite of the powerful influence of his brother-in-law More, Rastell finally allied himself with the Reformation. Whether or not Rastell 'was as important a figure in the early Tudor drama as I have implied, passages from his undisputed writings reveal him as one of the finest spirits produced by the impulses of the New Learning. He was seemingly the earliest outspoken champion of the vernacular; he was far more democratic than the group of greater men whose names are especially associated with the humanistic movement; he was the first of the Englishmen who showed a zeal for employing the drama to spread the newer ideals of the age—a zeal which was quenched only by the Puritans of Elizabeth's reign. At the same time, his efforts were tempered by a sweet reasonableness lacking in many Continental champions of a new Christian drama, and notably in his countryman Bale, who also used the vernacular to broaden his appeal.

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¹ Skelton's *Magnificence*, printed by Rastell, was written seemingly near the time when Rastell began the work of producing plays, and may have been presented on his stage. The fragment of *Lucrece* is probably another work from Rastell's press which, though suited to his didactic purpose, was independent of his suggestion. The title given by Halliwell-Phillipps from an old edition corroborates in some details Creizenach's conclusions as to source (*Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, XLVII, 200, 201). Halliwell-Phillipps ascribes the play to Medwall and to a date about 1490.